CHAPTER 6

EXPANDING BROADCASTS INTO FOREIGN LANDS

Tom Lewis learned from his Alaska trip that using shortwave transmissions to reach troops overseas wasn't practical for any broadcasts other than news and special events. He began seeking established outlets abroad that could carry AFRS programming. With the help of the Office of War Information (OWI) and his own staff, Lewis negotiated with foreign governments and commercial stations for use of their radio facilities.

On a reciprocal benefit basis, the AFRS Program Section bartered the finest programs from American radio. In return for the programs, they provided airtime on stations at United States troop locations. It was strictly barter, no cash changed hands. To protect the rights of performing artists, musicians, writers and composers who donated their services, AFRS required that all foreign commercial stations sign strict agreements. They'd make no attempt to capitalize on the free talent.(1)

AFRS bartered time, too, from government and commercial stations in Australia and from four stations in the Hawaiian Islands. Stations in the Middle East, India, China, and South Africa also signed agreements. By the end of 1943, a total of 140 overseas government and commercial stations were broadcasting AFRS programs to American troops! Yet, despite the success of securing the agreements, there were limitations.(2)

Foreign stations had their own established audiences to satisfy. They could not always clear either the number of hours nor the ideal timeslots desired by AFRS. In turn, American troops often didn't have the patience to listen to French, Arabic, Persian, Hindustani or Chinese language programs interspersed with the AFRS broadcasts. Moreover, American-style on-the-hour programming meant little to broadcasters in the Middle and Far East. Which made it virtually impossible to produce a stable schedule that troops could consult. Finally, most of the government-owned or overseas commercial transmitters were old, in a poor state of repair. They had an unfortunate propensity for going off the air at critical moments.(3)

Lewis struggled to develop Army-operated stations broadcasting a regular schedule of programs, but the implementation was not a simple matter. To put a significant number of stations on the air in all corners of the globe would require training of broadcasters and technicians. Readily available, sturdy and reliable equipment, along with spare parts, would have to be purchased. A distribution system for programs and a library of records that could be used in locally-produced shows would have to be created.

At first, Lewis' organization concerned itself primarily with program production and distribution. It viewed planning as only a secondary mission. Also, Lewis hadn't anticipated expenditures in the initial AFRS budget to purchase the kind of equipment needed to carry out a project of such scope.

To create the numbers of small, local stations required, AFRS received a big assist from the OWI. In January, 1943, the War Department had assigned AFRS the responsibility to install its own facilities overseas operated "by American soldiers for American soldiers." The OWI turned over to AFRS all the broadcasting stations they had installed or were in the process of installing in Alaska, the Aleutians and the United Kingdom. AFRS obtained all the necessary approvals and ventured to acquire the equipment needed to construct complete stations. Lieutenant Martin Work made the first actual purchases during a trip across the United States in December, 1942. A major procurement was then made of twelve 1,000-watt transmitters and eighteen 250-watt portable transmitters. They would serve "medium-powered" stations.

The growing mobility of the American Army demanded radio stations that were compact and very portable. They needed to cover a small area and be able set up or break down in a matter of hours in order to follow the advance of the troops. In typical Yankee ingenuity, AFRS developed a complete station consisting of a 50-watt portable transmitter, a music library and a supply of current transcriptions — all that could be packed in five suitcases!

ANDRE BARUCH AND THE AES

While AFRS was working to establish its own stations, the initial Army Expeditionary Station overseas sprang up in much the same manner as the first stations had in Alaska. As part of the preparations for the invasion of North Africa, the Adjutant General's Office activated the First Broadcast Station Operating Detachment on October 1, 1942, at Camp Pickett, Virginia. The unit, composed of eleven officers and nineteen enlisted men, left Norfolk on October 22 attached to the 3rd Infantry Division, a component of the Western Task Force.(4)

Upon their departure, a detail consisting of two officers and five enlisted men under the command of Lieutenant Andre Baruch left the Detachment and boarded the *U.S.S. Texas*. Its mission: to operate a 5-kilowatt transmitter and broadcast instructions in French to the native military and civilian population. This was done in hopes of averting unnecessary bloodshed when the task force arrived off

the coast of North Africa. Throughout the cruise, Baruch's men operated a monitoring center for all radio propaganda, both Allied and Axis.

On invasion morning, November 8, Baruch was on the gun deck of the *Texas*, with orders to begin broadcasting at 5:00 AM. He had gotten as far as, "Bon Jour, Mesdames et Messieurs, ici Andre Baruch ...," when the coastal batteries attacked and knocked down the radio antenna, ending his effort. With an eye to posterity, the former network announcer decided to record a first-person account of the invasion. Opening his glass-disc recording machine, he began, "Good morning. It's the morning of November 8, 1942, an historic time..." He got no further before the *Texas* let loose a salvo from its own battery. The recoil knocked everything awry including the recording machine. That ended Baruch's career as a combat commentator.(5)

Landing at Port Lyautey on November 10, Baruch and his detail rejoined the other members of the First Broadcast Station Operating Detachment in Casablanca on the 14th. The Detachment had orders to take over and operate radio stations in Rabat and Casablanca. However, the French took over the Rabat station and the Americans found that no station existed in Casablanca. So, for the next three weeks the unit had little to do. Finally one day, while sitting around waiting for orders, Baruch's executive officer, Lieutenant Houston Brown proposed that they start a radio station. After some exploration of the subject, the officers agreed they could build a transmitter and get on the air. First they'd have to receive permission from the commanding General. That was George C. Patton.(6)

After much prodding, Baruch went to Patton's headquarters on December 7 and asked to see the General. Appearing "in all his glory and fury," Patton demanded to know, "What the "blank" do you want?"

Baruch's explanation apparently struck the right cord. Perhaps it was because Patton had listened to the first experimental radio station which AFRS had set up to train broadcasters at the Desert Training Center at Camp Young, California. The General had been there preparing his troops for the African campaign. In any case, Patton signed a memo giving Baruch permission to open a radio station in Casablanca.(7)

With Patton's approval in hand, the detachment borrowed a 250-watt transmitter from the French on December 9. Unfortunately, the transmitter was designed for shortwave broadcasts. Brown and his men had to rebuild it, using material they "comshawed" from Army and Navy supply depots. With a long horizontal antenna, a Presto turntable and amplifier, a borrowed microphone and seventeen ten-inch records, the station went on the air. At noon, December 15, they began, using the name "The Army Broadcasting Service - The Voice of an American Soldier and Sailor." Baruch was proud of his men. "They had "very little talent [but] a lot of energy, and a lot of ambition."

The station broadcasted from Noon to 1:00 PM and from 7:30 to 9:00 P.M. Programming came from the detachment itself as individual soldiers and sailors volunteered their own records.

When Baruch worked with Lewis in New York before the war, he'd not even heard of AFRS. He "didn't know [Lewis] was even in the service."(8)

Baruch remembers that even with the scanty material, the station "was an immediate success. Where the listeners got their radios from, I don't know, but it seemed like every unit had a radio. We chose the frequency that was best for reception in the area and started doing fancy little things. We wrote crazy commercials and wrote funny little skits. We gave whatever news we could. We got gossip columns from the United States and stories about show business and everything that might be of interest to an American GI no matter where he was."(9)

Everything was going well until Patton's headquarters issued a directive on January 1, 1943, instructing all Army personnel to vacate the local French radio stations. Baruch's men scavenged radio parts and pieces of equipment to build a new transmitter with the increased power of 300-watts. The station relocated to the same apartment that housed the Army's radio monitoring center. They strung an antenna across an open lot to another building and by January 15, they were back on the air. It broadcasted from 11:00 am to 2:00 PM and from 3:00 PM to 8:30 PM. On Saturdays, they added more programming, half-hour, often extending the broadcast to 11:00 PM.(10)

Programming material remained scarce and the station had to scrounge from wherever it could. Yet, the station's antenna was parallel to the coast line and the radio waves skipped off the water giving greater range. Navy ships were sometimes able to hear the broadcasts from as far away as 30 miles from shore. As a result, when the sailors reached Casablanca, they often tracked down the station and contributed their records to the cause.(11)

Baruch recalls that he was not always successful in obtaining records for the station. One of his men came in one day to say he'd learned of an officer who had some records of singer Bea Wain. Baruch headed over to the officer's billet and walked into a room to find it splattered with pictures of Miss Wain -- who also happened to be Baruch's wife. When Baruch mentioned that he understood the man had some of Wain's records, the officer began to sing her praises. Finally, Baruch interrupted to say that he was from the new radio station. Before he could continue or even tell the officer that Wain was his

wife, the officer responded, "You wanna borrow them? Forget it. Get your ass out of here." Baruch came back to the station empty handed and acknowledged his failure to his men. "I was afraid I was going to get my butt shot off," he explained.(12)

Baruch found that live programs created their own dangers. Once a Colonel complained to him that the station should stop "fooling around." He then asked, "Why don't you do something important and build up the foot soldier – the infantry?" Baruch asked the Colonel what he had in mind. He suggested, "Well, put on a drama, boy, put on a drama." When Baruch noted he didn't have any actors, scriptwriters, sound effects or music. The Colonel told him, "Well, I'm sure you can do it. Now, you try it." Accepting this as tantamount to an order, Baruch agreed to try.(13)

Baruch found Humphrey Bogart and Frederic March in Casablanca on a USO tour. They knew him from back in the States. The two big stars agreed to act in a radio drama if the station could come up with a script. With the help of his staff, Baruch produced a radio play titled "The Infantry–Queen of Battles." They produced the sound effects, even the sound of live bullets. They found a recording of Stravinsky's "Firebird Suite" and used it for background music. The show proved "eminently successful." Even the Colonel liked it.(14)

Despite such problems in acquiring good programming, the station succeeded in filling the obvious need of providing entertainment for the troops. Sailors aboard one ship wrote to express their appreciation and enjoyment of the radio programs. "All the men here listen every evening and enjoy it very much." The staff of the local Navy Dispensary wrote to say they noticed every day "a great improvement in the programs. We feel that you now have a program not equalled by any at home. Keep it up; you've accomplished something that was very much needed here." Another group of sailors thanked the station for its "splendid job of bringing cheer to the forces over here in Africa." A group of soldiers from an ordnance company wrote with its appreciation "for many pleasant hours of radio entertainment. More power to you!"(15)

Neither AFRS nor the Special Services Division had any idea that the Casablanca station existed. In January, 1943, General Arthur Wilson of the Army Service Forces prepared to take over command of the Casablanca area. As he did, he discussed the matter of troop entertainment with Colonel John Stanley of the Information Branch. He got the Special Services Division to order a 250-watt and a 1000-watt transmitter to be sent to North Africa. Tom Lewis dispatched Major Charles Vanda and an enlisted technician to set up the station for the General.

When they arrived on January 26, Vanda delivered a memo to General Wilson informing him of the contents of the shipment of radio equipment. It included the two transmitters, turntables, a recording outfit and a record library. Vanda advised the General that he could put the station on the air in ten days with the proper support.(16)

At about the same time he learned that Baruch's station was already on the air, Vanda discovered that his transmitters and accompanying equipment hadn't arrived. He showed little interest in the Baruch's "freelance operation," but attempted instead to locate his missing equipment and set up his own station. Before he could, however, the 1st and 2nd Broadcast Station Operating Detachments received orders on February 19. The orders relieved them from duty with the Atlantic Base Section and assigned them to the Psychological Warfare Branch, Information and Censorship Section.

General Wilson detailed four officers and thirteen men of the 1st Operating Detachment to remain and continue operating the Casablanca station. Four days later, they received word that the War Department had placed all radio stations under the Special Services Division.(17)

Vanda finally tracked down his missing equipment. By the end of February, Baruch had an agreement to have the 1000-watt transmitter assembled and turned over to his station in Casablanca. The station also received the rest of the equipment except for the 250-watt transmitter. That was sent to Ouijda to establish a station for General Mark Clark's Fifth Army.

As soon as the new equipment became operational during the first week in March, the Casablanca station eliminated its original call letters, "ABS" (Army Broadcasting Service), and substituted the call "An Army Expeditionary Station... A Radio Service for the American Soldier and Sailor."(18)

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Martin Work from Armed Forces Radio in Los Angeles had arrived in Casablanca to investigate the situation in North Africa. Almost immediately, Work had to arrange to transfer Baruch and his entire unit to Special Services after the Psychological Warfare Branch recalled them. In addition, as a result of Work's survey, still another 1000-watt transmitter was sent from the U. S. to Algiers so that a station could be established there, too.(19)

Baruch became Chief of the American Expeditionary Stations in the North African Theater with Lieutenant Brown serving as his Executive Officer and Technical Director. General Eisenhower ordered stations installed in his Command wherever it was practical to do so. In Sicily, an American Expeditionary station was on the air by August 13, 1943, even though the fighting for the island did not officially end until August 7. By the end of January, 1944, eight stations were broadcasting in the Mediterranean stretching from Casablanca to Naples.(20)

Under the direction of Baruch and Brown, the Mediterranean stations provided programming that was to become typical throughout the AFRS network during World War II. Besides the regular program package from Hollywood, the stations featured live talent shows whenever practicable. These included a choral group in which the former New York Riverside Church soloist Richard Wallgren appeared and a Black quartet known as the Overseas Serenaders. Quiz programs pitting the services against each other were also very popular. Each station had its own request shows on which it played selections from the AFRS music packages. Following the mission directive of AFRS, they also featured news at the prime times of 6:30 to 8:00 AM, at Noon and at dinner time. They supplemented the national and international news (received via short wave) with their own local news, carefully written within the limitations of war theater censorship.(21)

For the most part, the locally-produced programs followed the recommendations of letters received from the stations' audiences. If a sergeant complained that "jive kept his hives awake", the station would institute 15-minutes of slumber music at the close of the day. If a captain could not listen during the regular news periods, a station would close the broadcast day with a two-minute news summary.(22)

As time passed in North Africa, requests showed a definite trend. At the beginning, the men put an emphasis on "hot jive." By the end of 1943, however, the battle-hardened soldiers where asking for sentimental ballads.

The impact on soldiers' morale can be measured from letters such as the one Baruch received from a sergeant in an evacuation hospital. It stated, "The other evening we heard swing music and then, 'This is the American Expeditionary Station.' Goose pimples ran up and down our spines, and since then, our morale has increased one thousand percent. Last week we had a tent full of boys treated following the Sicilian Campaign. When we turned to your swing program, smiles of joy and complete forgetfulness of their pain came over the faces of the boys. Words can't express the happiness that your programs have given to the American soldiers. So, thanks for giving us a few hours of happiness each day. Good luck!"(23)

Labors had their rewards.

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(1)Progress Report.
(2)Ibid.
(3)Ibid.
(4)Andre Baruch, *The Story of an Army Expeditionary Station*,/n.d. 1943/cited hereafter as Baruch, *Story*.
(5)Interview with Andre Baruch, July 8, 1983.
(6)Ibid.; Baruch, *Story*.
(7)Ibid.
(8)Ibid.
(9)Baruch interview.
(10)Baruch, *Story*.
(11)Baruch interview.
(12)Ibid.
(13)Ibid.
(14)Ibid.
(15)Letters in AFRTS files, January and February, 1943.
(16)*American Expeditionary Stations, North African Theater, History and Operations*,/n.d., 1944/, cited hereafter as *Stations History*; Captain Charles Vanda to General Arthur Wilson, January 26, 1943.
(17)Ibid.; Baruch, *Story*.
(18)Ibid.
(19)*Stations History*.
(20)Ibid.; Ralph Carson, *On the Air Over There*, Liberty, December 4, 1943, p 56.
(21)Carson, *On the Air Over There*, p 57.
(22)Ibid.